The project for the "Galleria Oretea" by Giuseppe Damiani Almeyda and other unbuilt "passages" in Palermo

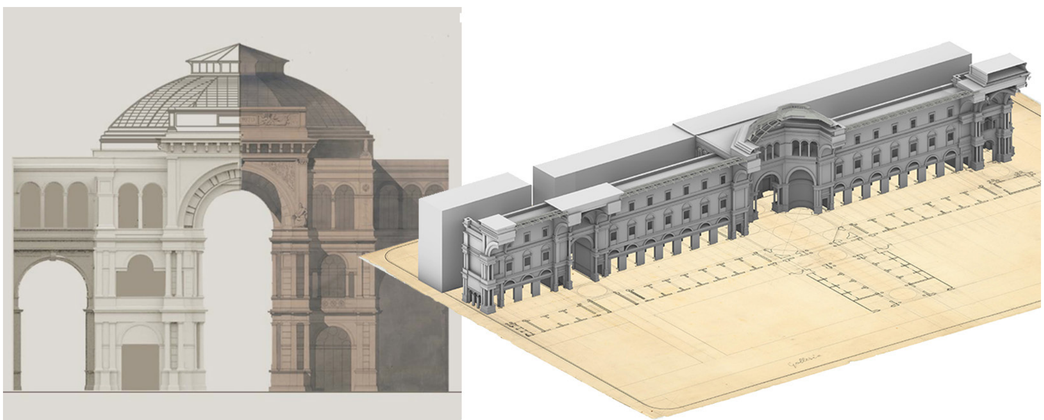
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Abstract

The contribution aims to conjecturally reconstruct and analyze the unrealized project by Giuseppe Damiani Almeyda regarding the "*Galleria Oretea*" for Palermo. It is an urban project of considerable size and impact, which should have provided the city of Palermo, in the old town, with a gallery in the style of the Parisian "*passages*", inspired by the contemporary creations of Milan and Naples. Thanks to the recent cataloging and publication of the entire corpus of drawings in the Damiani Archive, a reinterpretation of the project was carried out through a three-dimensional recomposition of the graphics and a conjectural reconfiguration of the parts left unresolved, in order to weave a "dialogue" to distance between the author's unfinished intentions and the virtualization of the resulting spatiality, immersed in the places where it was originally conceived. Two other projects were developed for the area, different in terms of layout and concept, signed by Francesco Paolo Rivas and Michele Utveggio. The project that was carried out, less ambitious and smaller in size, was drawn up by Paolo Bonci for the contextual restoration of the ancient district of the Tannery. The work then proceeded to open further windows of comparison with the projects subsequent to that of Damiani, which also remained unrealized, until the actual construction of the "*Galleria delle Vittorie*" on via Napoli.

Keywords
Unbuilt projects, conjectural reconfiguration, 3D modeling, urban and architectural analysis

Topics
Image for interpreting



doi.org/10.3280/oa-832-c47

Introduction

Among the proposals inherent in the Town Plan drawn up in 1885 by eng. Felice Giarrusso for the city of Palermo, in addition to the rehabilitation of the popular neighborhoods and the expansion of the residential areas to the north, there were projects for the insertion of new architectural presences in the fabric of the historic city. Since the unification of Italy, the Sicilian capital had shown itself to be particularly attentive and receptive to the new major design themes of the modern city, such as the construction of monumental theaters (the Teatro Massimo and the Politeama, designed by GB Filippo Basile and Giuseppe Damiani Almeyda) and English-style gardens (English Garden along via Libertà and Giardino Garibaldi in Piazza Marina, both designed by Basile senior) and the willingness to host national and international exhibitions, which materialized for the first time in 1891 and lasted for subsequent decades along the directional axes of urban expansion lines. Together with one of the major redevelopment plans of the historic city, the one that would have affected the district of the ancient Tannery, the municipality had thought of installing, to replace the dilapidated and crumbling houses, a large urban gallery in the style of the Parisian *passages* in iron and glass, to be enriched with shops, cafes, bistros and homes for the new middle class on the upper floors. The project was linked to the opening of one of the large vehicular *percées* that would cross the historic center, the future via Roma: the Gallery should have formed the transverse seam between the new road and via Maqueda, longitudinally lapping the oldest part of the medieval city marked by the last visible vestiges of the Cassaro wall. The drafting of the project was entrusted to Giuseppe Damiani Almeyda, who already in 1864 had formulated a "model-plan for city markets"; the architect developed a first version - as an ideal building - for the illustrative apparatus of his "*Istituzioni Architettoniche ed Ornamentali sull'Antico e sul Vero*", and then provided a definitive version, unfortunately not brought to executive and remained unfinished by design and no longer built, in 1886.
The reference model which Damiani draws most is given by the "Vittorio Emanuele II" Gallery in Milan built by G. Mengoni between 1865 and 1877: the architect punctually reproduces it in various survey tables combined with the preliminary studies on the Palermo project.

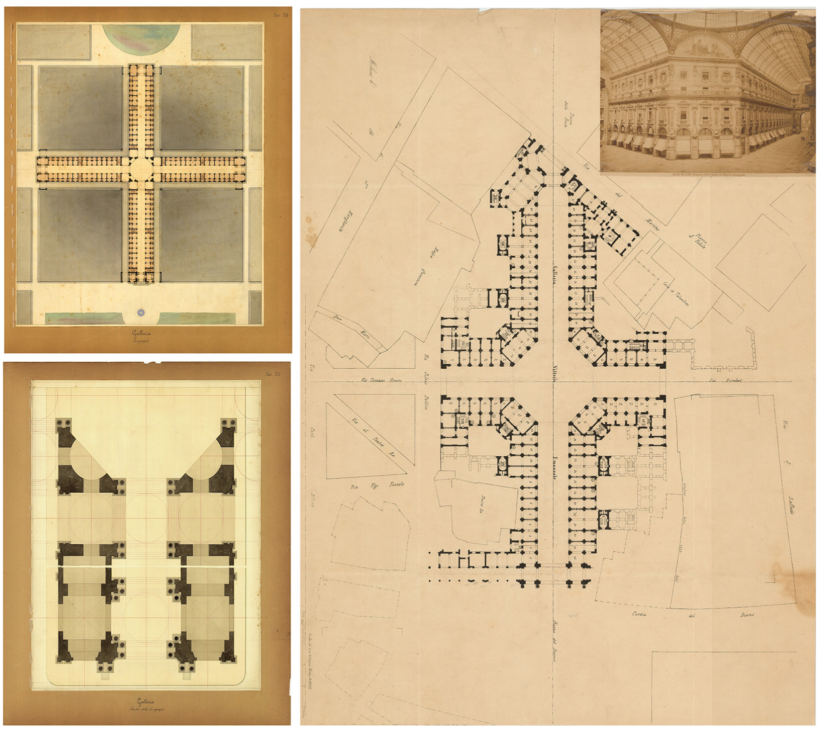


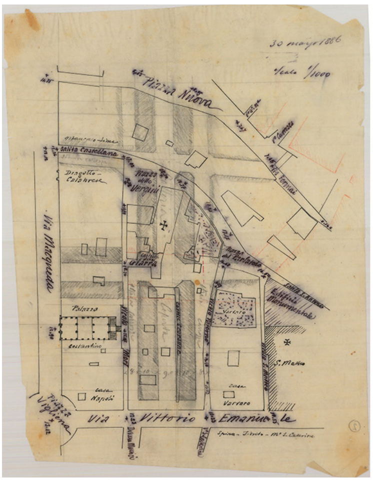
Fig. 01. G. Damiani Almeyda's studies on an ideal Gallery and on the Milan Gallery (Damiani Archive).

The Damiani Almeyda project: a three-dimensional reconfiguration

The Gallery project, called *Galleria Oretea*, was elaborated in 22 tables illustrated in pencil, ink and watercolor. It is possible to identify different versions of the main elevation and of the plan probably prior to the final draft. This study was the subject of in-depth study of the latest version of the project, leaving out the previous hypotheses, as the latter is the most complete and definitive.

The drawings are kept in the Giuseppe Damiani Almeyda Archive in Palermo and date back to 1886. Like most of his architectural production, in line with its classical imprint, the project is returned by the orthogonal triad of plan, section and elevation. From the latest version there are two plans, four sections and two elevations. For the purposes of the reconstruction, the main use was made of the plant, as well as the main elevation and the section.

As regards the unit of measurement the metric system was used, as confirmed by some annotations that the author has inserted within the tables themselves. The scales of representation are various, the main façade in watercolored and the octagon section are represented on a scale of 1:50, while the plants are 1: 200. To these are added the topographical studies, represented on a scale of 1: 1000, all in orthogonal projection.



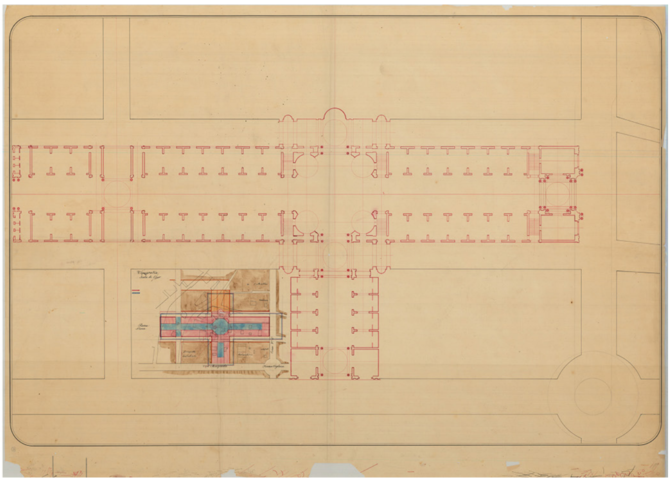


Fig. 02. The "Galleria Oretea": planimetric development and urban setting (Damiani Archive).

The digital reconstruction started from archival drawings, to move on to digitization and finally to vectorization. The latter took into account the modularity, the axes of symmetry and the coherence between the plan and the elevations. As a result of the use, as an exclusive method of representation, of the orthogonal triad of plan section and elevation, which causes a loss of three-dimensional vision, some inconsistencies arise. The first, very evident, concerns the number of spans present in the plan which was greater than those in section. In this case, as in general in the drafting of the entire model, the indication of the plant was preferred as it was considered posthumous with respect to the longitudinal section; moreover the same, being on a larger metric scale, is more controlled thanks to the greater level of detail. The same goes for the stringcourse cornices, which were deduced from the main façade and executed in a congruent manner where they had only been drawn in the overall dimensions. In addition to this, small metric inconsistencies have arisen, always resolved in the comparison between elevations and sections. In the digital model, the plan was obtained by vectorizing the original design, correcting it through a direct study on the archival drawing to avoid possible acquisition deformations and finally corrected according to the indications obtained from the section and the elevation. After establishing the plan, we moved on to the development of the three-dimensional model. Despite the large number of drawings, the façade overlooking Piazza Nuova was missing: the latter was rebuilt following the indications in the plan and in continuity with the string courses present inside the building.



Fig. 03. Identification of project sites and map of pre-existing buildings.

The compositional system is represented by a fairly simple space, with a compact volume, completely rooted in the territory; it consists of two arms, one longer, the other shorter, at the intersection of which an octagonal geometric space is formed. In the two arms, with a strong symmetrical value, the rhythm is marked by the arches that make up the commercial rooms; these boards, like the central part, are barrel-covered in iron and glass. The monumental entrances are located at the ends of the axes and have three overlapping orders on the façade in the classical manner in correspondence with the three elevations of which the building is made up. The two elevations above the commercial rooms overlook the gallery through a system of rectangular openings and are highlighted by string courses that manage to give continuity between the inside and the outside of the building.
The project, as previously mentioned, is viscerally rooted in the territory: Damiani Almeyda imagined a covered commercial route, with a transversal axis to Via Maqueda and a major one, parallel to it, which connected Corso Vittorio Emanuele to Piazza Nuova. The latter was in fact the subject of discussion by the administration of the period, as it was the seat of an important city market that needed to be redeveloped. There is evidence of the desire to build a gallery already in the Luigi Castiglia plan; but the argument is subsequently taken up by the engineer Giarrusso, who gave the precise location of the covered gallery in the resulting area of the expansion of the Piazza Nuova market, specifically between Via Roma and a new parallel between Corso Vittorio Emanuele and the Piazza San Domenico. One of the most singular aspects of the Almeyda project, perhaps decisive for the failure to carry it out, is precisely the choice of the building area outside the perimeter of the planned demolitions for the rehabilitation of the Conceria district and within the Cassaro district,

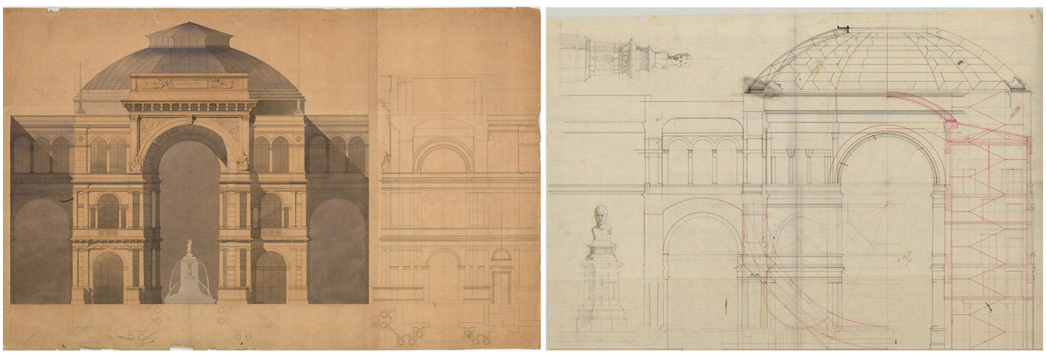


Fig. 04. The "Galleria Oretea": elevation studies and internal sections on the octagonal hall (Damiani Archive).

where the construction of the gallery would have required further and massive demolitions -this time no longer of public housing but of palaces and churches facing the main axes of via Toledo and via Maqueda-. This reveals the scruple most sought by the author, namely the search for an integral seam not only between the axes already established and those of new construction, but mainly between residential and popular districts of the same historic city. Neither the Giarrusso plan nor the Castiglia plan, in fact, envisaged demolitions to be carried out inside the Cassaro, having focused exclusively on the "rehabilitation" of the markets and popular districts. Almeyda, on the other hand, looks for the two main facades on the two main streets of the Baroque "Cross", almost re-proposing, inside the Gallery, a second octagon similar in dimension and visually to the neighboring "Teatro del Sole" (the intersection of the "Quattro Canti") and maintaining, on the lower part of the Tannery, the previous Piazza Nuova with the elegant arcaded facades designed by Vincenzo Di Martino in 1821.

The front facing the Tannery constitutes the least resolved part of the entire project, which led to many difficulties in the three-dimensional conjectural reconstruction: the considerable difference in height between Corso Vittorio Emanuele and Piazza Nuova, assuming that the uniformity of the roofs along the entire development of the gallery would have in fact entailed a considerable height on the facade which would have looked out over the ancient district. The project plans, which accurately report the elevations of the ground, show neither slopes nor stair systems arranged to mediate the slope on the northern front. Some of the architect's autographed sketches collected in the archive (specifically those indicated as "prospect 6", "prospect 7" plus a third without signature) seem to want to study the difficult connection with the pre-existing structures with scores lightened by the fraying of airy loggias, different from the severe and majestic architectural order arranged for the main facades.

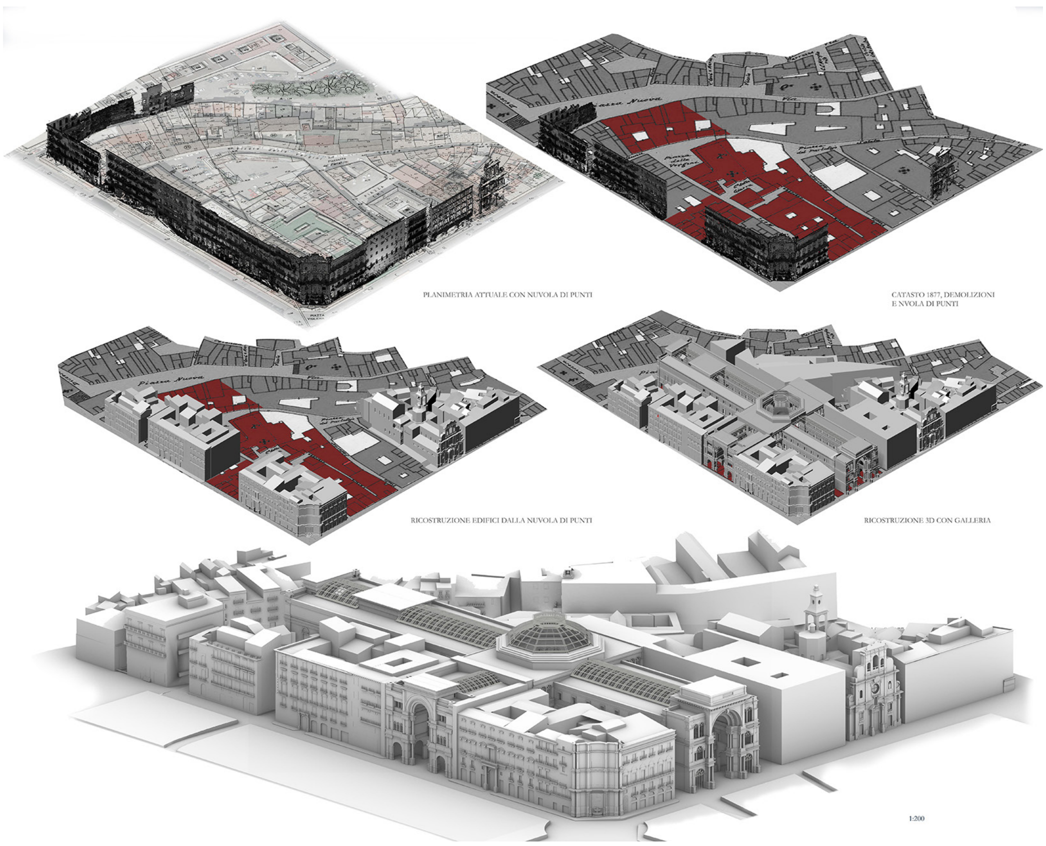


Fig. 05. 3D survey and modeling of places and volumetric insertion of the project.

The quotes reported on the sheet made us think of a "balcony" device, placed above the Di Martino portico which would have constituted a sort of natural "plinth" and direct connection to the road. The cut of a slightly oblique perspective canal, from via Maqueda towards the direction of the church of Santa Margherita (whose demolition was foreseen in the Giarrusso plan, and which was then destroyed following the urban rehabilitation works) provides another interpretative starting point aimed at to underline Damiani's interest in seeking a relationship of connection and dialogue between the different entrances, and therefore a fairly clear intention to safeguard at least the architecturally more interesting portions of the old Tannery compared to the Cassaro. At the price, however, -it should be noted- of considerable and unforeseen demolitions on the "upper" part of the urban fabric.

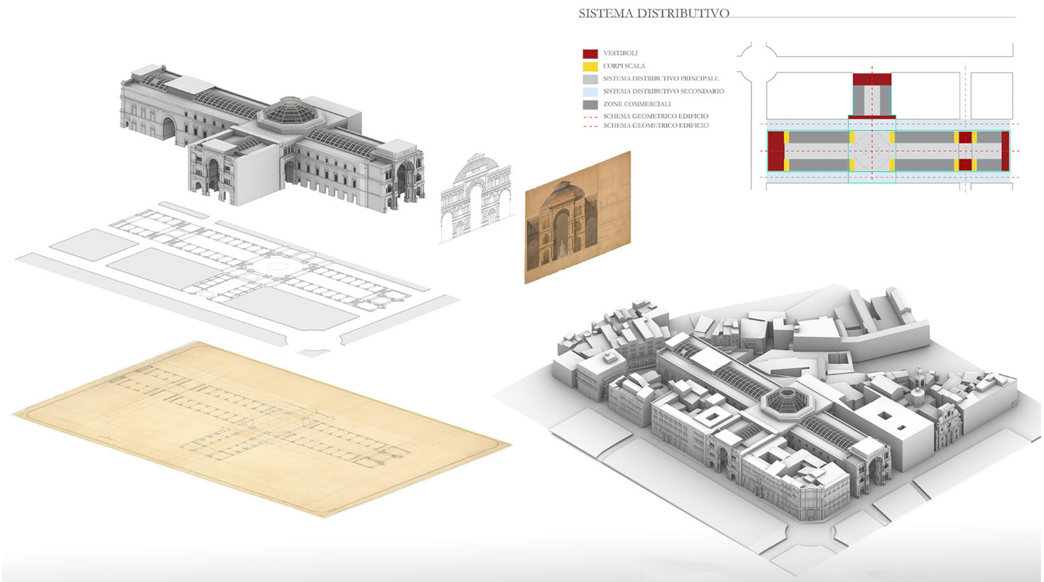


Fig. 06. 3d analysis and interior distribution system.

Subsequent projects by F.P. Rivas and M. Utveggio

The project was unsuccessful, probably in consideration of the fact that its costs were high; but the desire persisted for a long time that Palermo, like all great capitals, should equip itself with a gallery with monumental characteristics.

Almost simultaneously with the Damiani project, the architect Francesco Paolo Rivas developed an alternative version, falling in the same places but with a more limited urban scope. The project was offered to the municipality in 1893 and was exhibited in six graphic tables at the Universal Exposition of Turin in 1898, together with other projects signed by Ernesto Basile. Rivas takes up Damiani Almeyda's design line, concentrating the dislocation of the Gallery on the Cassaro and maintaining the idea of the two main entrances on via Maqueda and Corso Vittorio Emanuele; however, he reduces its longitudinal development, interrupting the passage at the height of via Salita Castellana and from here mediating the descent towards piazza Nuova with systems external to the building.

Its version includes a "Greek cross" layout, enhanced at the intersection of the two arms by the usual large octagonal domed hall, with the addition at the four ends of as many square halls, also covered by glazed domes so as to rain the light direct in the interior corridors.

A second lighting system (and at the same time internal ventilation) was offered by sixteen vertical semicircular windows on the walls.

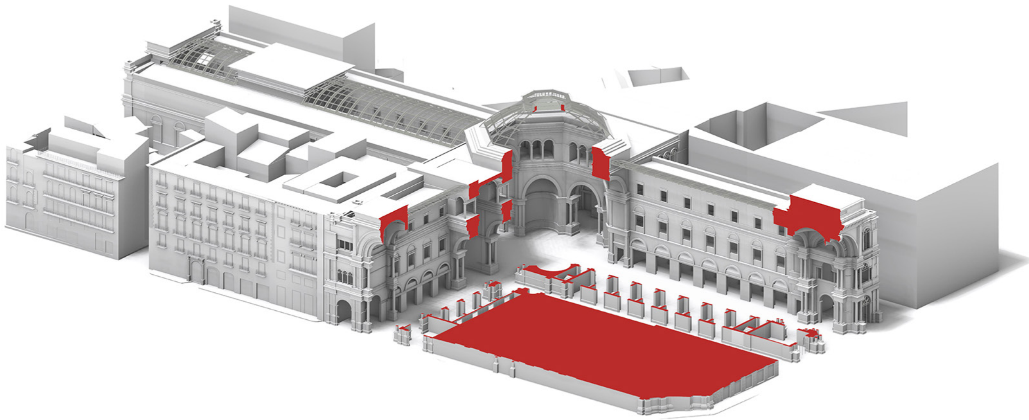


Fig. 07. Axonometric cross section.

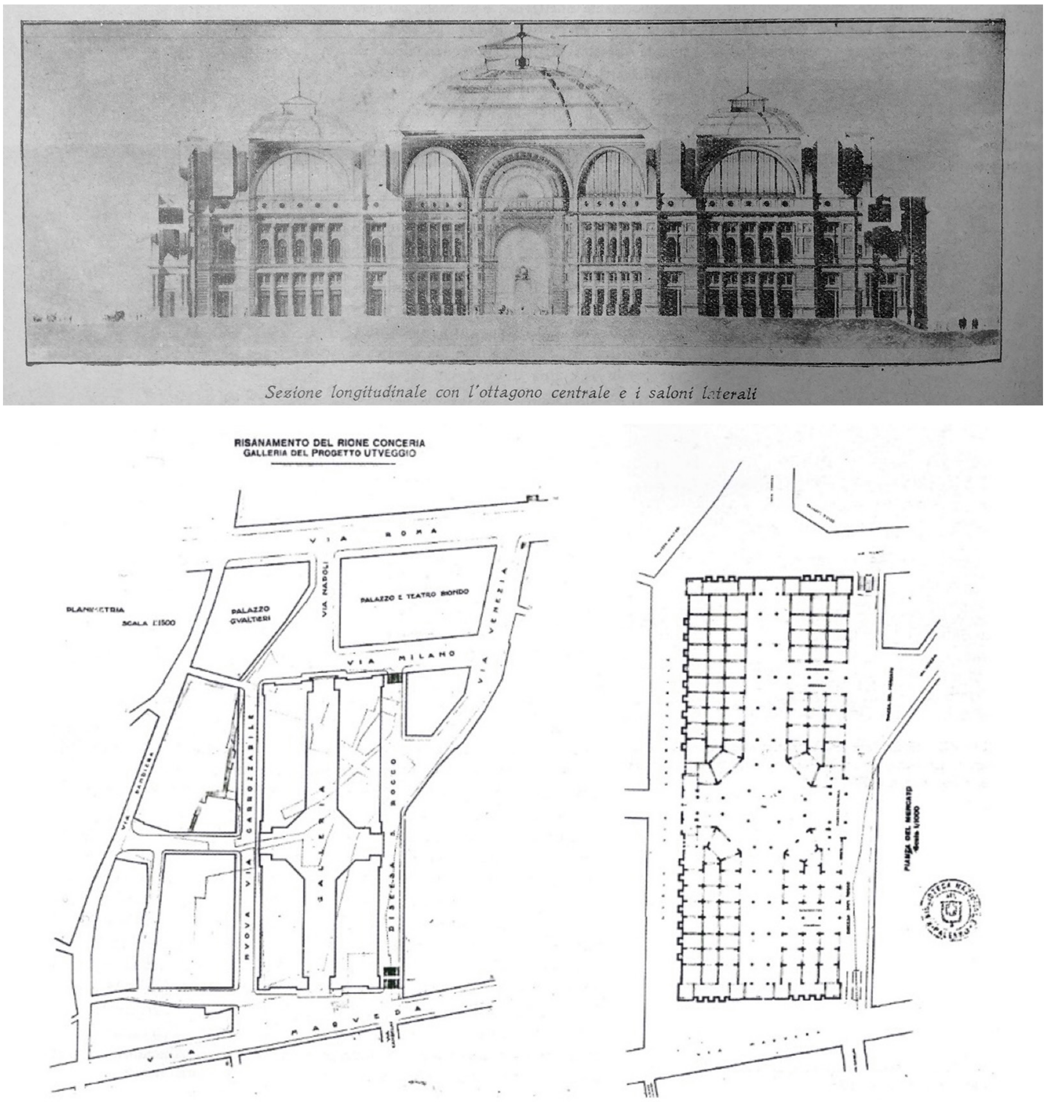


Fig. 08. The projects of F.P. Rivas (1893) and M. Utveggio (1925).

The project, whose scope and costs were slightly lower than that of Damiani Almeyda, in any case left unsolved the main problem of the public administration, whose intention was concentrated on the architecture to replace the houses to be demolished in the ancient Tannery.
The question was taken up again in 1925, when the builder Michele Utveggio proposed an ambitious urban gallery project in the area of the rehabilitation.
It was a dimensionally colossal work, like the Milanese gallery, extended in plan for about 150x60 linear meters. The block, with four elevations above ground, was to be used as offices and homes. Utveggio had foreseen a particular exploitation of the difference in height from via Maqueda to via Roma: keeping the environment of the gallery at the same level as the floor of the upper via Maqueda, he provided below this a large room, 5 m high, to be used as a food market, open on two sides and facing the lower street level; the front on via Roma had in the meantime been occupied by the construction, in 1903, of the Biondo Theater: the eastern entrance of the building would therefore open onto a triangular square that would have mediated the rear of the theater, the bulk of the gallery and the architecture historical survivors of the demolition along the Via Bandiera. The western front, along the Via Maqueda, maintained the rigid planimetric orthogonality of the whole and cut out a slight space set back from the edge of the road axis. The project returned to the colossal dimensions imagined forty years earlier by Damiani Almeyda, shifting its location entirely to the lower level of the ancient district, as originally envisaged by the master plan. Not even this idea, however, was taken into consideration for the realization.
This began under the Fascist period, in the years between 1933 and 1937, and the architect Paolo Bonci and the builder Emanuele Rutelli took care of the project and its execution. The building, called the "Galleria delle Vittorie", was conceived as a rectangular block of considerably smaller dimensions, with a single main entrance on Via Maqueda and two minor side entrances, and five elevations above ground to be used for housing.

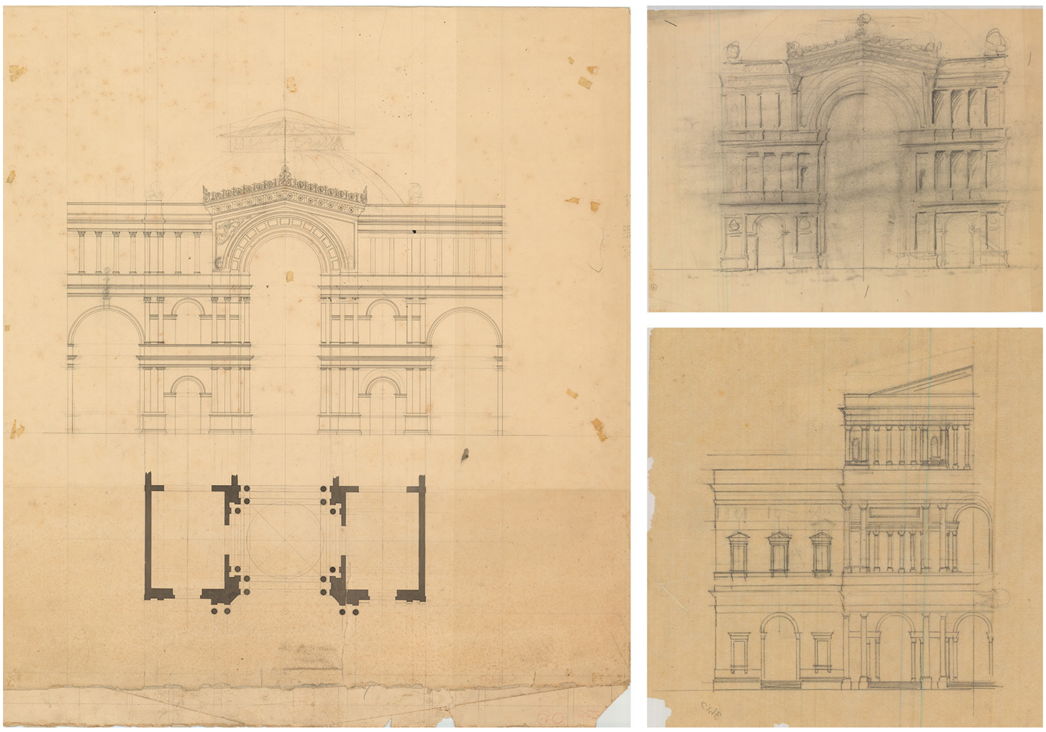


Fig. 09. Further hypotheses for the fronts on secondary entrances (Damiani Archive).

Conclusions

The reconstruction that we have made, thanks to the use of three-dimensional immersive visualization systems, offers itself to a hypertextual and dynamic reading that allows to appreciate the spatiality of the project conceived by directly simulating its virtual insertion into the territory.
This proved to be particularly useful in the inevitable operations of "mending" and graphic integration of the missing or not described parts in the project tables, also considering the fact that, since it is not an executive project, many drawings illustrate compositional rethinks without these having been corrected in previous papers. The project, in short, is complete in terms of overall intentions and punctual solutions, but maintains that character of "work in progress" which requires a graphic reinterpretation, mainly volumetric rather than planimetric. It is the aspect that made the virtual three-dimensional graphic reconfiguration operation more interesting, despite the awareness of the risks associated with it, that is, of incurring misinterpretations of the author's ideas. It is a risk that we wanted to face, in order to obtain an immersive and integral perceptual visibility, which can also be experienced "in situ" through special devices, and to be able to return in its fullness one of the many "unfinished" chapters in the history of Palermo architecture. The "remote dialogue", carried out over the span of almost fifty years between the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century (with the consequent language changes) with the other design versions developed for the same idea.
It is our intention to continue the study by integrating the virtual reconstructions with the redesign of the Rivas and Utveggio projects, even if the operations of systematization and consultation of the relative archives (both are private archives in which the heirs are completing the catalog and collection operations) have just started.

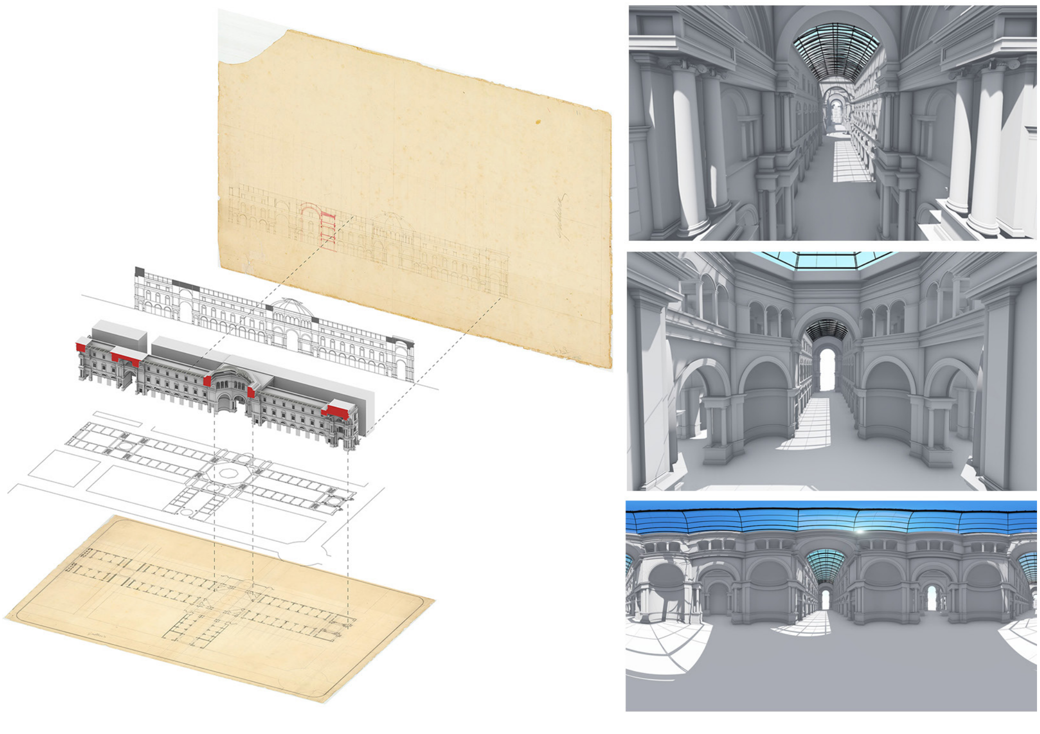


Fig. 10. Systematic comparison of drawings and 3D models and internal perspectives for immersive visualizations.

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To cite this chaption: Girgenti Gian Marco, Prinzivalli Caterina (2022). The project for the "Galleria Oretea" by Giuseppe Damiani Almeyda and other unbuilt "passages" in Palermo. In Battini C., Bistagnino E. (a cura di). *Dialoghi. Visioni e visualità. Testimoniare Comunicare Sperimentare. Atti del 43° Convegno Internazionale dei Docenti delle Discipline della Rappresentazione/Dialogues. Visions and visuality. Witnessing Communicating Experimenting. Proceedings of the 43rd International Conference of Representation Disciplines Teachers.* Milano: FrancoAngeli, pp. 672-681.

 Isbn 9788835141938